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SUBJECT: Mosaic under pressure: Quebec's identity and religious tolerance debate (Part 1 of 2)

This message is Sensitive but Unclassified

Summary

¶1. (SBU) An undercurrent of social conflict has emerged between Quebec's identity as a "secular" province and the more overt expressions of faith, particularly by immigrants whom Quebec has received in recent years. While "reasonable accommodation" originated in jurisprudence of labor relations between employers and employees, it has become the political catch-all term for this building tension, as Quebec's, particularly Montreal's, increasingly multicultural society questions to what extent its society should shape its rules and values to "accommodate" religious or cultural considerations. The reasonable accommodation debate has built even more momentum recently. Several high profile incidents have stoked intense public discourse and political opportunism, especially as Quebec's provincial election hits full momentum, with politicians, academics, media, religious leaders, minority advocates and everyday Quebecers all weighing in on what is "reasonable" accommodation of racial, ethnic and religious minorities in an increasingly diverse society. Even if the issue recedes slightly after the elections, Canada's most recent census and ongoing academic, think-tank, and policy planning assessments indicate that the reasonable accommodation debate will continue, given immigration trends and Quebec's reliance on immigrants for economic, cultural and political influence vis-a-vis the rest of Canada and pro-Quebec federal policies.

Behind The Reasonable Accommodation Debate

¶2. (SBU) Quebec's identity as a "secular" province, as well as the emphasis placed on gender equality in public and private life, can be traced to the "Quiet Revolution," the revolt against the Catholic Church, which occurred during the 1960s. While traditional Quebec culture tended to be patriarchal and a majority of Francophone Quebecers adhered strongly to Church teachings, the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s produced a society that cast off Catholic teachings (and religion in general) and elevated the status of women. Although, according to Statistics Canada, 83% of Quebecers identify themselves as Catholic, only an estimated 20% of those are practicing (compared to 88% of Quebecers who attended Church on a weekly basis in the 1950s). A prominent CBC radio personality and political analyst commented privately to PAO: to be politically correct demands that he "intellectually" understand the Quebec Muslim woman's argument when she says she "chooses" (and is not intimidated into) wearing the hijab, but he admitted that he and his Quiet Revolution generation still have an emotional knee-jerk reaction to anything perceived as challenging gender equality or Quebec's cultural identity as a fervently secular society.

13. (SBU) Quebec also registers a strikingly low birth rate, among the lowest in North America, (although it made modest gains last year, which some attribute to new daycare subsidies). A recently-released census snapshot of Canada's population shows that Quebec's population grew by 4.3% between 2001 and 2006, a growth predominantly fueled by immigration. Quebec has not kept up with the 5.3% average growth rate in the rest of the country, producing a slight decline in the province's overall share of the Canadian population. In fact, this low birth rate is one of the main factors behind the provincial government's proactive policy of attracting immigrants, especially those from Francophone countries, to bolster its workforce (reftel A). (Ironically, however, in Quebec, the historical under-employment of members of ethnic minorities is most acute in public institutions.) Quebec's reliance on immigration as a source of population growth concerns some Quebecers. One ADQ candidate was dismissed from his party for stating that native Quebecers need to "boost their birth rate; otherwise the ethnics will swamp us." This sentiment is far from universal, but reveals the increasing tension related with incorporating immigrants into Montreal's social fabric while it strives to maintain its identity as a French-speaking minority within Canada.

Soccer, Spandex, Spoons and Shari'a: How far is too far?

14. (SBU) On February 26, 2007, a Muslim referee in the Montreal-area town of Laval ordered an 11-year old Muslim girl from Ottawa to remove her hijab or be prohibited from playing in a soccer tournament. When the girl's team forfeited the match, in protest of the referee's decision, the issue quickly gained national prominence as the latest reasonable accommodation case. The Quebec Soccer Federation sided with the referee, stating that all religious

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headgear was prohibited for safety reasons. The International Football Association Board (IFAB) ruled on March 3rd that Law 4 on players' equipment covers the issue, in essence letting the Quebec Soccer Federation's ban prohibiting the hijab because of safety reasons - including the possibility of accidental strangulation -- stand. Many questioned the ban's rationale, charging it was less about safety and more about politics regarding reasonable accommodation. Ironically, Montreal and other cities across Canada are to host FIFA's Under-20 World Cup Tournament this summer, and Canada is vying for the Women's Soccer World Cup in 2011.

15. (SBU) This incident was only one in a series of situations that have brought the long-simmering issue of reasonable accommodation to a boil. Several Montreal schools and social institutions have grappled for some time with the need to provide prayer space for Muslims and allow for other tangible expressions of faith, such as the wearing of Sikh ceremonial daggers or the hijab. Other events have included: complaints from a Hasidic Jewish synagogue about young men catching glimpses of latex-clad women working out prompted a downtown YMCA to frost its windows (at the expense of the synagogue) in November 2006; an incident at a Montreal-area school in which a Filipino-Canadian boy was chastised by his teacher for his eating habits (the boy's family claimed that his Filipino tradition of spoon and fork eating caused the teacher to accuse him of eating "like a pig") became front-page news in the Philippines and even provoked a small gathering of spoon-and-fork-wielding demonstrators at the Canadian Embassy in Manila in April 2006; and in 2005, the Quebec Human Rights Commission ruled that private schools did not have the authority to expel a young woman for wearing her hijab and also rejected the use of Islamic tribunals for the settlement of family disputes.

16. (SBU) The Montreal police has prided itself on (and often been praised for) its positive engagement with various cultural communities. However, the city's police force fell into the debate at the end of 2006 when an internal Montreal police magazine suggested female officers step aside to let male colleagues deal with male Hasidic Jews. The publication's advice drew criticism by those who viewed the suggestions as setting an institutional policy in direct conflict with the traditionally-held Quebec value of

gender equality. At the same time, some members of the Hasidic community dismissed the advice as unnecessary, noting that there had not been any complaints from their community with regard to interactions with female officers. A Montreal police contact said that the suggestions formed part of a series of brochures to help police officers deal with members of various cultural communities, and noted that there had been no complaints by female officers.

Herouxville: Propagating Negative Stereotypes, Xenophobia?

17. (SBU) The remote town of Herouxville (population 1,275 according to the most recent census; its citizens include one black family among a population that is otherwise exclusively white and Roman Catholic.), 100 miles north of Montreal, became the center of the controversy when its city council adopted a controversial code of conduct for immigrants, apparently aimed at Muslim immigrants, in January 2007. A hodgepodge of social norms and values, the code of conduct prohibits head coverings (but not applicable to Catholic nuns attire), the stoning of women, and female circumcision. As international, Canadian and Quebec media descended upon the small town, Herouxville presented a political and societal challenge to Quebec's multicultural model of diversity and tolerance, which Herouxville's council claimed has reached its limits. On February 11, a delegation of Muslim women, wearing head scarves, visited Herouxville to educate town council members and residents about the Islamic faith and to appeal for changes to the town's "code of life" which the women argued unfairly targeted religious minorities. The town toned down portions of the code, removing references to burning women with acid and stoning women to death, but claimed the code of conduct was misinterpreted by media.

18. (SBU) The Herouxville controversy is still causing ripples of reactions. For example, a young Lebanese Montrealer's poem for an Arabic-language newspaper that praised Muslim women for wearing the veil and criticized Quebecois women for drinking and promiscuity provoked another round of reflection. Likewise, bloggers' comments show how raw and emotionally-charged the issue is, especially to those who view it as part of a larger trend of religious concessions to Muslim immigrants in what should be a secular state: "I think that anyone who comes from another country, for whatever reason, and wants to benefit from all our freedoms and social benefits, should act like one of us" reads one. "This is ANOTHER attempt by some religious fringe trying to impose their religious habits on the general population. Either fit in or get out!!!"

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Comment

19. (SBU) Some analysts and commentators have described the recent firestorm about reasonable accommodation as a purely media-created phenomenon resulting more from news competition than real citizen concern, or as a fickle, easily manipulated election issue that has no real impact on the lives of Quebec 7.6 million residents. Others have stated that Quebec is simply catching up to other parts of the Western world on the issue, citing similar multicultural societies growing pains and debates in France and the Netherlands. Regardless, drawing on historical identity and religious sensitivities, Herouxville and youth soccer were the incendiary events that have guaranteed reasonable accommodation's place in Quebec's provincial election rhetoric (see septel).

110. (SBU) The debate about reasonable accommodation reveals deeper concerns in Quebec about the integration of immigrants into society, and also illustrates the vast differences in how immigration and multiculturalism are perceived by Quebec's urban and rural inhabitants. Even in Montreal, Quebecers have begun to question whether the "mosaic" model of multiculturalism, so prized as a component of Quebec and Canadian society, might have unforeseen consequences for social cohesion and whether the accommodation of diversity in Quebec society should, at some point, be subject to limits. One Montreal human rights law expert summed up the current

situation, in which small, relatively innocuous symbols have taken on provocative meanings, as stemming from Quebecers' tendency towards "not caring what color you are, or what religion you practice, so long as you act exactly as we do." The insatiable popular appetite, as reflected in hyperactive media coverage, academic discussion and popular culture, coupled with Quebec's religious history, immigration trends and public policy assessments indicate reasonable accommodation will continue to touch nerves and be a major component of Quebec's social, political and cultural discourse on its identity.

MARSHALL